

Testimony, Friday, April 14, 2023, 10 am
Committee on Health and Human Services
LD 1161: An Act to Fund Free Health Clinics
To: Rep. Brennan, Sen. Ingwersen, and Representatives

I am Leslie Nicoll, PhD, MBA, RN, FAAN. I am the Coordinator at the Portland Community Free Clinic (PCFC), a role I have held since 2009. I have been involved with the PCFC as a volunteer and per diem nurse since 2001. The PCFC is very near and dear to my heart. I write in support of LD 1161.

The PCFC was established in 1993 and is located at 39 Forest Avenue in Portland, a site we share with other City of Portland programs. We see adults who lack health insurance and need primary care. We are a volunteer model clinic which allows us to see a large number of patients with a very small paid staff. We have a roster of 120 volunteer physicians, nurse practitioners, nurses, receptionists, counselors, and a physical therapist. Patients are seen by appointment and treated with dignity and respect while receiving high quality care. We are the largest free clinic in Maine and see over 600 patients annually in more than 1800 encounters.

I have always been acutely aware of the need for our safety-net healthcare services, which is only increasing. In 2015 the free clinic in Biddeford closed. In 2019, a free clinic in Buxton also closed. Historically, we confined our service area to Cumberland County but we eliminated that requirement with the changes in free services available to uninsured patients in Maine. Consistently since 2019, we have seen patients from York, Cumberland, and 7 other counties in the state.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on us and our services. At the very start of the pandemic (March 2020) we were closed for 2 weeks, but by March 30th we began a phased re-opening of in-person care. By June 1st we were back to full operations. "On the fly" we created a telehealth program to schedule appointments for patients who could not be seen on-site. Prior to April 2020 we saw zero patients by telehealth; in 2021, we saw 195 using this technology. These encounters are in addition to our regular in-person appointments.

The pandemic is not over; we are experiencing ongoing demand for our services. New patients come to us after they have lost their jobs and their health insurance. Former patients are also returning. Patients are presenting with increased anxiety, depression, loneliness, weight gain, disordered sleep, and changes in their nutritional and bowel status. We do not see patients with COVID symptoms but the ripple effects of COVID are apparent. Appointments that might have taken 15 minutes before now last 45-60 minutes since so many patients are experiencing ongoing stress, have many questions, and need thoughtful, professional support and reassurance.

The Friends of the PCFC is our non-profit funding partner. Since 2013, the Friends have been successful in raising the funds needed to keep the PCFC open, but the fundraising cycle is relentless. Funds to support the PCFC from LD 1161 would give us a small cushion and allow us to recruit more volunteers, expand our services to more patients, and buy necessary equipment for increased services. Understanding this, I sincerely hope the HHS Committee will support LD 1161. Thank you for reading this testimony.